

## **From National Exile to Institutional Blindness: Mirela, a Congolese child**

Maicon Salvino Nunes de Almeida<sup>1</sup>

Mônica Pereira dos Santos<sup>1</sup>

Carine Mendes da Silva<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Rio de Janeiro/RJ – Brazil

<sup>2</sup>Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Brasília/DF – Brazil

**ABSTRACT – From National Exile to Institutional Blindness: Mirela, a Congolese child.** The present paper aims to discuss a certain *institutional blindness* observed in a state school of the state of Rio de Janeiro while investigating the case of a Congolese refugee in Brazil. We carried out a qualitative research, of the case-study type (Yin, 2010) in which we observed a refugee student in the school where she was enrolled and interviews with educators e other social actors. Our analysis is based on the Omnilectical Perspective (Santos, 2013). The results showed that the school might have developed what we called an *institutional blindness* when it comes to the inclusion of refugee students despite the good intentions of the educational professionals.

**Keywords: Education of Refugees. Omnilectical Perspective. Inclusion in Education.**

**RESUMO – Do Exílio Nacional à Cegueira Institucional: Mirela, uma criança congoleza.** O presente artigo tem por objetivo discutir a *cegueira* observada em uma instituição escolar pública fluminense a partir do acompanhamento do caso de uma criança refugiada congoleza. O estudo, qualitativo do tipo estudo de caso (Yin, 2010), caracterizou-se pela observação não participante da aluna ao longo de um mês na escola para a qual foi encaminhada, além de entrevistas com educadores e outros atores sociais. Para nossa análise, utilizamos a perspectiva Omnilética (Santos, 2013). Os resultados nos permitiram perceber que a escola em questão parece ter desenvolvido uma certa *cegueira* quando se trata de casos de inclusão de crianças refugiadas, a despeito das boas intenções de vários de seus profissionais.

**Palavras-chave: Educação de Refugiados. Perspectiva Omnilética. Inclusão em Educação.**

## Introduction

The motivation for this research started with a photo published in newspapers around the world, of the tragic accident of the three years old Syrian refugee boy Alan Kurdi. In the picture, published in September 2015, he appeared as he had been found: dead, with his face turned to the sand, on a Turkish beach. The article said that his family was fleeing the war in Syria and had the objective of reaching Europe in search of peace and a new beginning. His boat wrecked in the Turkish sea, leading to the death of the boy, mother and brother. Only the father survived.

The rawness of that image, associated with the cold reality of the words that described its history and context, had a profound impact on us. It is not that we did not know that injustice, violence and disrespect for life are not practices, unfortunately, common to human history, but that image reminded us that such practices lead to extermination, to the end of existence. This, in turn, reminded us, as educators that we are, that there are other practices that can lead to the same sad ending, within the very field of Education (and other social fields). If not literally, at least symbolically: at the end of a life trajectory (in this case, academic); at the end of the dignity of a life; at the end of the will to belong, be and participate in a given group.

We are referring to the diverse and perverse forms of exclusion that materialize in the daily school space and against which we have struggled in our trajectories as teachers, researchers, extension workers, activists. In the case of refugees, we had not yet properly perceived this population, and this episode made us think about how many refugee children there are in this world that, in addition to going through the dangers portrayed in that article (and in so many others that we started to find from that day onwards), are also experiencing dangers of exclusion in the educational context of the countries in which they take refuge? How are these children, after going through this traumatic event of forced immigration, treated when they finally arrive in a country and go to school? How are they treated, for example, when they arrive at the Brazilian schools? Are their traumas taken into account when learning? Is their language, in many cases different from the Portuguese language, taken into consideration? Is the school a welcoming space for this refugee child?

Seeking to understand these issues, we investigated how Brazil has been participating in welcoming refugees. In the international scenario, at least until 2018, Brazil had been recognized as a country that welcomes refugees. According to the Ministry of Education, in 2015, counting only the Syrian public, there was the insertion of 2 thousand children in public schools in the country. In terms of reception and enrollment in public schools, the country is number 1 in Latin America, being praised by the UN for its initiative (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Despite the positive reception, there are few clarifications on how these students of such a different culture and language would be insert-

ed into the Brazilian school environment (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – UNHCR, 2016). In an article published in 2016, UNHCR's Brazilian branch narrated the case of a 12-year-old student in São Paulo named Hanan Dacka, who reported being bullied in the classroom by her classmates, due to being a Syrian child and being unable to keep up with the class, on top of having difficulties understanding the language.

Also, according to the UNHCR (2016), combining data with UNESCO, only 50% of the refugee children in the world enroll into a school, out of a global average of over 90% non-refugees. Over the years, some drop out of school, resulting in only 22% of these now adolescent refugees being in school, with an overall comparison of 84% non-refugees. At a higher level, the chasm is even greater, with only 1% of refugees, out of a global average of 34% of adult non-refugees.

This represents a crisis for millions of refugee children and adults, because as the UNHCR (2016) points out, education for refugees is neglected. According to this institution, education would be one of the few opportunities to transform and build the next generation, so that it may provide a better quality of life for the tens of millions of people forcibly displaced worldwide.

Anticipating this global concern for the education of refugee children, in 2015, in Incheon, South Korea, at the World Education Forum 2015-2030, 20 education related goals for the next 15 years were established. Amongst these goals, the eleventh highlights the importance that host countries guarantee the education of the refugee public, while also offering children and adolescents a safe school environment, free of violence and prone to healthy development.

To summarize, the World Education Forum (2015)<sup>1</sup> pledged to develop more inclusive educational systems, more resilient to meet the demands of children, young people and adults in these contexts of internally displaced persons and refugees. The Forum recommended a broad response, appropriate to crises, from the emergency response to the recovery and reconstruction of the refugees' country of origin; coordination of responses at national, regional and global levels, up to the development of capacity to minimize risks, ensuring that education is maintained in situations of conflict, post-conflict and in the beginning of the recovery of the affected country.

Brazil was represented in this Forum by the then Minister of Education of Brazil, Renato Janine Ribeiro, by the UNESCO representative in Brazil, Lucien Muñoz, and by the UNESCO Education Coordinator in Brazil, Rebeca Otero<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it committed itself to the same decisions and to their implementation at the national level.

Today, four years later, we wonder about the extent to which these measures have been taken, considering, in particular, the fact that an impeachment has taken place in the country, a center-right government then took power and, to make things more "curious" (to say the least), a far-right government won the elections soon after, in 2018.

Seeking to inaugurate, in the field of educational studies, investigations about the schooling process of a refugee child from the Democratic Republic of Congo and located in a school in Duque de Caxias, in a macro, meso and micro dimension, at the state, municipal and institutional levels respectively, we ask ourselves: How is the process of entry of refugee children who come to the state of Rio de Janeiro?

To answer this question, we resorted to two researches: one, between 2016 and 2017, which led to a course completion paper that raised the process of these refugees' arrival in Brazil and their insertion in schools (Almeida, 2017). In the ongoing research, when we dedicated ourselves to data analysis, combined with the findings of the previous research (2016-2017), we were faced with a surprise element, linked more closely to the institutional context than to the specific case of the observed student. That was what we are going to call here a kind of institutional blindness, as we will see later. As a consequence, we began to ask ourselves how the school in which she studied was characterized. What could we learn from what we saw from the inclusion/exclusion processes that the child was going through, and to what extent was this reflected more as an institutional issue than focused on a subject?

Thus, the objective of this article is to explore a certain process of naturalization of situations of inclusion in a complex context in which, as we defend in our perspective (Omnilectical), one can never find only inclusion or one sort of element. The analysis of these situations, necessarily, will end up pointing to the coexistence of opposite and complementary aspects in cultural, political and practical terms.

Therefore, we intend to carry out an omnilectical analysis of the discourses we perceive within the school routine. It could be said that such speeches, at a glance, would be able to ensure that the student in question was included. At the same time, however, we were observing institutional practices that, at a closer look, could be used to deconstruct the very idea that the case in question would be (only) an example of inclusion.

## **Methodology**

In this section, we will describe the general outline of the research, the instruments we used to generate the data, and we will talk about the participants who made themselves available to participate in this study.

### *General Outline*

This research is based on the qualitative approach to the production of scientific knowledge, widely disseminated in the sciences that have the human being and its practices as an object. The qualitative approach gains space in studies of a socio-educational nature, such as this one. We have an interest in analyzing and presenting interpretations of the investigated issues within the context in which they exist,

that is, considering the components, interactions and influences that shape them. Next, we will present the instrument, the participants and the procedures used in the composition of the research, culminating in the analysis of the data and results.

### *Instruments*

We utilized the semi-structured interview because it opens possibilities for a dialogue with the interviewed person, allowing him/her to point out data that go beyond what is outlined in the interview script (Manzini, 2004).

The script for the semi-structured interviews was composed of two major themes to be explored with the interviewees: the reception of the refugee child; the interaction of the refugee child with peers and the school community.

At school, we spent 1 month in the classroom observing the refugee child, between October and November 2018, in her 5<sup>th</sup> year of elementary school, and her relationship with the school community. We went for the method of simple observation and did not participate. According to Gil (2008, p.101), simple observation is “[...] one in which the researcher, remaining distant from the community, group or situation they intend to study, spontaneously observes the facts that occur there”. Based on this observation, we interviewed the other teachers who worked with the refugee child and we were able to arrive at the data that we will discuss here. In this article, we will not narrate the period in which we accompanied the child, but the year in which the refugee child was inserted and had friction with the class, in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year of elementary school, in 2016, from the perspective of the teacher who welcomed her into the class.

### *Participants*

The educators who participated in this research and the date of the interviews are, respectively:

At the state level:

The Pedagogue of Caritas Archdiocesan of Rio de Janeiro on 12/04/2016 and the Social Worker of Caritas Archdiocesan of Rio de Janeiro on 11/08/2018.

At the municipal level:

The coordinator of the Special Projects Center of the Education Department of Duque de Caxias on 02/10/2018

In the school:

The teacher of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of elementary school in 23/10/2018.

### *Procedures*

After being endorsed by the Research Ethics Committee of the Center for Philosophy and Human Sciences of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, the research project was presented to and approved by the Education Department of Duque de Caxias in the first half of 2018. The research happened in the beginning of August of the same year, with an interview with the Social Worker of Caritas Archdiocesan of Rio de Janeiro, unfolding, in September, with an interview with the Coordinator of NUPE (Nucleus of Special Projects) during which the institution referred us to the school in which the student who is the focus of this article studied at the time.

In this school we interviewed all the teachers who worked with the refugee child: The teacher who welcomed her, in 2016, in the third year of elementary school, the teacher in the reading room, the subsequent teacher in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of elementary school and the conducting teacher in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of elementary school, where, in addition to the interviews, we also accompanied the child for 1 school month. The child started school at the age of 10, in 2016. We observed her at the age of 12, in 2018. A semi-structured interview was conducted with audio recording with all participants.

To converse with the data, we used an interview conducted previously, in December of 2016, with the Pedagogue of Caritas Archdiocesan of Rio de Janeiro. The interview with the pedagogue was our first contact with the refugee theme. We aimed to understand how the refugee children arrived in Rio de Janeiro and how they were allocated to the state schools. We used a clipping of the data, where the educator tells us about the arrival process of the refugees in Rio de Janeiro, a fundamental piece of data to understand the universe of the refugee children.

### *Data analysis*

For data analysis, we used the Omnilectical perspective (Santos, 2013), which we will explain in the next section, as it is an epistemological perspective, both conceptual and methodological.

### **The Omnilectic: a *praxic* epistemological perspective**

The Omnilectical perspective had its roots in the 2000s, from Santos' studies with material that triggered institutional self-review processes known as the Index for Inclusion (Booth; Ainscow, 2002). Originally created to provoke schools to (re) think about their own dimensions of inclusion cultures, policies and practices, the authors argue that school institutions are permeated by the dimensions above, and that, in order to promote inclusion, it is necessary that they develop, in particular, an inclusive cultural dimension, on the assumption that this is the basic dimension so that any effective transformations are possible in schools.

By *cultures*, the authors refer to the values, beliefs, certainties and perceptions of school subjects about any aspect of life. Cultures are built, but can be so ingrained that they may become something complicated to transform without a deep immersion in a reflexive-decisive-active process. In other words: a process in which the aspects that cause exclusions in the current reality are reflected on, decisions are made about what constitutes a priority in order to combat these exclusions and decisions are put into practice.

By *policies*, the authors refer to the organizational aspects implicit when drawing up a plan to combat exclusions, according to the priorities raised. Here, therefore, deciding on the forms of support that will need to be mobilized and provided will be an essential element, as will the strategies by which the implementation of the action plan will begin.

By *practices*, the authors refer, in particular, to the curricular organization and its implementation, that is: what content, what didactic strategies, what materials need to be available or developed with the goal of promoting inclusion and practices to combat the exclusions identified and prioritized?

In the Omnilectical perspective, these three dimensions are brought up, with some subtle differences. With regards to cultures, we do not consider them to be more fundamental than the other two dimensions. We do not believe, therefore, that we first have to change cultures in order to then change the other two, and thus promote effective changes. We believe that the three dimensions have the same weight and importance when it comes to promoting changes, and that these can start with any of those, but will always involve the three dimensions at stake, to a greater and lesser extent, all the time and alternately, on a continuous basis.

With regards to the *policies*, the Omnilectical perspective considers that it is not only about the organizational arrangements that will promote support for the development of inclusion practices. They also refer to the political spaces themselves, at the macro, meso and micro level, meaning national, regional/local and institutional/group/personal. In this manner, intentions are of political order and, in this sense, they can be represented both by national Laws and Guidelines and international treaties (macro levels) as well as circular and state and municipal secretarial or legislative ordinances (meso levels) or even institutional (micro level). Still belonging to the micro level are the personal decisions made, consciously or unconsciously, that will regulate (or have this intention) our day to day, or our near future (example: a year-end resolution).

Finally, in defining the dimension of *practices*, Omnilectics considers curricular issues, but also issues related to pedagogical-didactic practices themselves, as well as aspects linked to the specific reality of each school community and each subject within this community.

This, although the origins of Omnilectics can be traced to the years of research with the Index, it has been developing since then and started to incorporate, between 2007 and 2011, the dialectic dimension (Santos, 2013). The dialectic of Omnilectics is the one defended by Lukács, that is, a dialectic that, due to being materialistic:

[...] realizes and develops the approach to objective reality together with the procedural characteristic of thought as a means for this approach [e], it can understand universality in a continuous tension with the singularity, in a continuous conversion in particularity and vice versa. Thus, the concreteness of the universal concept is purified from any mystification and conceived as the most important vehicle for knowing and dominating objective reality (Lukács, 1978, p. 104).

In other words, this dialectic emphasizes the need not to separate what is in the order of thought from what is in the order of reality; what is in the order of ideas from what is in the order of matter; because both are ideas and matter. Both are parts of a *praxic* totality, which needs to be understood and articulated when thought in relation to other *praxic* totalities. The Omnilectical perspective appropriates this discussion and argues that the contradictions at stake, perceived by the dialectical analysis, do not contradict each other in the sense of denying each other, but rather of incorporating each other, because each contradictory aspect identified in itself constitutes a part (a singularity) and at the same time a totality. These parts-totalities are elements of a more complex game of several parts that compose, in turn, more totalities, always changing, as the parts acquire new singularities from new elements (or parts) that enter the analytical game. This game, despite being analytical, is based on the concrete materiality of human life, which is historical and social.

More recently (after 2011), the author's studies have led her to believe that, in addition to the tetradimensionality of Booth and Ainscow (cultures, policies and practices) and Lukács (dialectic), there would also be a fifth dimension: that of complexity, inspired by the works of Edgar Morin, in particular when he refers to the relationship between complex thinking and the uncertainty principle. By claiming that "[...] in today's mechanistic world, determinism has been shaken and modern science has to deal with the uncertain" (Morin; Almeida; Carvalho, 2007, p. 86), the author complements his idea by stating that, for this very reason,

It is also necessary to teach that today we know that the human adventure is unknown and that we have only two instruments to face the unexpected: The first is the awareness of risk and chance. [...] The second instrument is the strategy and this implies being able to modify the behavior according to the information and new knowledge that the development of the action provides us (Morin; Almeida; Carvalho, 2007, p. 99).

In short, therefore, the epistemic aspect of the Omnilectical perspective occurs not only by bringing together important analytical categories within the same concept, but also by launching itself into the intellectual task of putting into play categories supposedly specifically attributed to modern (Booth, Ainscow and Lukács) and postmodern (Morin) thoughts. As for its *praxic* characteristic, it is linked to the fact that it is a perspective concerned with not performing a purely conceptual analysis of events, but rather always linked to numerous concrete possibilities of cultural, political, practical and complex aspects that dialectically both contradict and complement each other, forming new explanatory relations that imply new perspectives on the part-totality relationships, perspectives which are continually based on the intellectual exercise and on the materiality of the observed phenomena.

In this direction, the Omnilectical perspective corresponds to a kind of multi-lens, through which we exercise our gaze several times, exploring, each time, the possibility of seeing the situations from a new angle. This translates to the idea that nothing can be explained forever, and that each explanation found, in addition to being relative, is provisional, but by no means less legitimate. The relativity we refer to here is not one that implies falling into relativism and thinking that everything is possible, but one that considers the possibility of multiple ways of seeing and explaining phenomena at a given historical moment when taking into account the five dimensions in constant interplay and in multiple determination of each other.

## **Mirela's Case: results and discussion**

In this section of the article, we will present the data and discuss it from an omnilectical perspective. We will start by bringing some contextual data (of the refuge and the city) and then we will present excerpts from Mirela's school life, from her third school year.

### *Brief Contextualization of the Refuge Process*

In order to achieve our goal, we believe it is convenient to provide a brief explanation of how the process for Congolese people to come to Rio de Janeiro as a refugee is. To achieve this, we will use the interview with the Pedagogue of the institution Caritas Archdiocesan of Rio de Janeiro. On the occasion, she reported that there are several ways in which refugees arrive in Rio de Janeiro:

Some travel from Kinshasa, which is the capital of Congo, if I am not mistaken, to Luanda, in Angola, and from there they get a direct flight to Rio. So, the process is easier. The crossing between the countries of Africa is not as complicated as it is here in South America, or worldwide. So, they manage to get this flight here. And then they settle here, it is easier (Pedagogue, 2016).

There are also cases in which, according to the pedagogue, the refugees come in containers of ships. There are two ways of entering

the container. The first is through a coyote<sup>3</sup>, paid by the person or group of refugees, who guides them to the ship. The second occurs when an individual, or group, enters the ship in a clandestine manner without first contacting a mediator to enter the vessel. In both cases, refugees only realize that they have arrived in Rio de Janeiro when they dock and leave the vessel.

The pedagogue also warned about the fragile situation in which the refugee children can find themselves:

We know that some were violated, some suffered physical violence, some were also tortured while their friends were tortured (in Congo). [...] And when they arrive here, they are all afraid of what they will find. So it is natural that they take time to adapt, that they have other peculiarities, that a Brazilian child, at the same age, in the same classroom, will not have (Pedagogue, 2016).

One last aspect worth mentioning, about the context in which these refugees arrive in Rio de Janeiro, is linked to the precarious conditions and destinations to which these people are exposed and suffer from when they arrive here. According to the interviewee, as they enter with little money (on average R\$500.00), mothers, mainly, try to find cheap spaces, but that do not have as much presence of armed traffic. Thus, they end up settling in places where the traffic is less violent, so to speak. The goal is to not stay on the streets. And thus, they end up in places like Gramacho<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, we went to the municipality of Duque de Caxias in 2018, because according to Caritas Archdiocesan of Rio de Janeiro's pedagogue, it was where the largest number of Congolese refugee children resided in 2016. The first meeting with the Duque de Caxias Department of Education took place in September of 2018 at the Nucleus of Special Projects (NUPE), resulting, in the same month, in us heading to the school. The school where the research took place, as previously mentioned, was chosen based on NUPE's recommendation because it had the largest number of Congolese refugee children in the municipality (21 children in 2017, according to data from the Nucleus).

Even though we do not have more precise data on this whole process, the omnilectical lens allows us to see that it is a difficult process, in which cultures (the idealization that another country might be able to be better in the future; the day-to-day life of the country that receives them and the cultural shock suffered, what each country (or the people of each country) conceives in relation to the other in terms of its laws, its conceptions and histories...), political (the macro, meso and micro of the country of origin and those of the receiving country, as well as the support – or lack thereof – for them to establish themselves on a new soil) and the practices (the journey, the arrival, the first contacts, the arrangements...) are dialectically and complexly inter-influential.

Dialectically, because each example of what we see as cultures, policies and practices constitutes situations in themselves (totalities) that, together with others (the examples given for policies and practices

and so alternately from one dimension to another), become parts of new totalities built by the understanding (which is ideal and material) about them that we acquire as we resume the exercise of analysis.

Complexly, because each of these movements, of resuming analysis, opens new doors for the understanding of new totalities that throw us in an universe of uncertainties with which we have to learn to deal so that, if necessary, we may build the exits, visible or still invisible, from/ to each situation.

### *The municipal context*

The source of information about the municipal procedures related to the education of Congolese refugees, from Duque de Caxias, was the same that allowed us to choose the school: the interview with NUPE's Coordinator.

An interesting piece of information that was given to us from the beginning was that it is very difficult to estimate the number of refugee children sent to schools each year. Given the constant mobility of refugees, NUPE could only provide us with the number of children for the year 2017, which was 43 children, distributed in 9 schools. Thus, the school located in Gramacho was the one suggested by NUPE, given the large number of refugee children, which was 21.

When we asked about how the municipality performs the registration of refugee children, we were informed that these children arrive in Brazil without a school record and carry out an evaluation at the school institution to which they will be sent, with the aim of finding out in which class it would be best for them to be allocated to. This assessment is made in Portuguese. It is important to remember that the Congolese children speak French as their native language. Furthermore, they speak their native dialect, which in the case of the focus child of this article is Lingala.

It is possible to notice, in this passage, that when they are directed to continue their schooling process, refugee children are taken to an assessment of non-contemplative knowledge of their language, culture and specific matters, which are part of the universe already presented to them during their lives. However, would it be utopian to think that, in institutional terms, the municipality in question should be responsible for providing linguistic assistance to all children? Thus, we reflected on whether the municipality could offer alternatives for a better assessment of the refugee child, such as, for example, an interpreter at the time of the test to expand the possibilities of thinking, creating and answering the assessment questions.

Omnilectically, considering this event, of which the evaluation is a part of, it is essential to dissect it, as it is the primary contact of the refugee child with the school (practice), which in turn should be minimally attractive and welcoming (culture), bearing in mind that it is the core of coexistence with Brazilian culture (as this is our policy – chil-

dren have to go to school), with which the child will have frequent contact throughout the time they are here (cultures and practices). In this context, the didactic energy that anticipates the evaluation (political and practical dimensions)

This evaluation has cultural, political and practical dimensions interwoven dialectically and complexly. Cultural, because they are imbued with values, principles, beliefs and languages that can coincide, and that also do not coincide. Political, because the content and application of the test are decided and applied by the school based on Brazilian parameters, with the institution having the power to rethink forms of assessment considering the culture of the refugee child, which points to quite complex results, to say the least. Finally, the practices, in this case, ones that exclude others, do not consider the values and language of the refugee child, evaluating them as if they were a Brazilian child – nonsense, to say the least.

Thus, we perceive the first moment of institutional blindness, as the municipality believes it is including the refugee child in the school institution through the evaluation, but, when looking at it from other points of view, we can also say that it is performing an act of exclusion, for not considering (or not realizing that it does not consider) the symbolic (linguistic) elements and cultural dimensions of this person.

Adding to these evaluations the dialectical and complex dimensions, we can say, on the other hand, that, in view of Brazil's (relatively recent) history welcoming refugees, perhaps we could say that, at this moment, what is done, even if it is, in our perception, and at this moment, incomplete or even undesirable, marks an inclusive moment of a history that was even more focused on exclusion, as it did not even accept refugees in the past (dialectic). This could open up new possibilities (complexity) to view the situation and put us in a movement to see that, perhaps, this finding may be an indication that new, more pro-inclusion moments, will be verified in future cases.

After the initial assessment, the NUPE coordinator demonstrated disinformation regarding the destination and the educational literacy model to which refugee children are subjected. We understand that a Nucleus responsible precisely for monitoring these school trajectories should have access and monitor these processes. This becomes clear when the NUPE's Coordinator comments: "Now, I haven't been able to see with the teachers what they really do to teach Portuguese yet. This data does not exist yet. How they do it too is... for me, still something I'm curious about".

Once again exercising our omnilectical gaze, it would be possible to understand that NUPE and its professionals, due to seeing themselves at a relatively recent moment with regards to school-age refugees in Brazil, have not yet realized the cultural differences that the language and the customs of another country carry, as well as having built this path because we do not have guidelines (policies) more directly linked to reception and referral procedures for schooling, which may,

ultimately, have created this inaction (practices) with relation to considering these specificities at stake. When we look at it this way and understand, dialectically, that these dimensions, even though they can be seen in virtually opposite positions, are part of a larger, historical picture, and as such, in continuous movement, it can change its own relationship of opposition to a relationship of complementarity. And in this manner, we open new doors (complexity) to speculate about what else could be part (old and new; visible and invisible; predictable and still-not-so-predictable) of the new totalities to be built by the new outlooks.

### *The Institutional Context*

The school to which Mirela was sent is, as we said, in the district of Gramacho. It is medium sized, with 794 students, which services people from Early Childhood to the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Elementary School and Youth and Adult Education. Mirela's arrival at the school took place at the end of the first two months of the year 2016. To protect the refugee child's identity, we will not reveal the name of the school.

Mirela was chosen for a more in-depth observation by the school's pedagogical advisor, due to her being a child whose teachers were more accessible, that is, less resistant to the presence of an observer in the classroom.

This child's educational path will be presented based on the school experience lived by the child in the third year of Elementary School, which took place in 2016, as narrated by her teacher. For the purposes of this paper, we will discuss excerpts from the interview below.

### *Mirela's Arrival and Reception in 2016, according to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Teacher*

Mirela was inserted in the classroom in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of elementary school, aged 10, at the end of the first two months, in a class in which the students already knew each other. According to the teacher, the students in the class already had their affection groups defined, as it was a class that had already come together from the previous year. Within this context, Mirela was a new student.

The teacher introduced her to the class saying that she came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which was in Africa. He asked the class to welcome her, as she came from far away. According to the teacher, initially, the class was welcoming. The children kept asking Mirela how to say some objects in French, and Mirela answered.

Mirela, native speaker of Lingala and French, entered the room already speaking Portuguese. According to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year teacher, the child had passed through CARJ, where she learned to communicate, even without understanding some words. According to the CARJ Pedagogue (2019), the Portuguese course for refugees is aimed only at adults, but children learn the language quickly when living with their parents and

family. For the teacher, the insertion of the child in the class, a priori, was successful during the first week of class.

In the second week of class, the teacher noticed that the refugee child was quieter and more serious. Whenever he asked Mirela, she would always answer: “[...] nothing is happening”. The teacher then used his recess, when teachers have 15 minutes to drink water, to see if there was something wrong. The teacher then noticed that Mirela did not play with the Brazilian children at recess. The educator then encouraged Mirela to play with the other children, but she did not want to participate, remaining seated on the school bench, alone. This behaviour was repeated over a few days and the teacher continued insisting, day after day, that Mirela played with the other children. Mirela, always reluctant, refused and said she just wanted to sit, alone.

Whenever the teacher would ask if there was something going on and if Mirela wanted to talk, the child would say there was nothing wrong, and would continue to sit on the school bench, without playing with anyone. This situation lasted for a month. The teacher insisted so much that, one day, at recess, Mirela started to cry desperately and said that nobody wanted to play with her, the girls did not want to play with her, that nobody liked her and that she wanted to go back to her country.

The teacher, hearing the story, started to cry alongside the child and took the student to the principal’s office, seeking help in this situation. The principal stayed with the student and, after recess, the teacher told the class that she was disappointed with the students, as they were practicing racism with the girl, who was fleeing a war and needed to be welcomed. The teacher cried, and some students also cried. The following day, Mirela’s parents went to the school and said that the teacher needed to do something, as their child was a target of racism. The teacher offered to look for solutions for the case, admitted that she still did not know how to solve this issue, but that she was in constant dialogue with the school to seek better alternatives to work on this issue. In the principal’s office, Mirela explained that she was stopped from playing by a group of girls lead by a black girl, like Mirela.

From the day the exclusion of the refugee child was noticed, the teacher started to work more deeply on issues related to our country’s past and our African roots, seeking to combat the racism that happened in the classroom. This work was not completed, as the teacher had to leave the school to attend a Master’s Degree in Ethnic-Racial Relations.

Several aspects stand out to us when we reflect omnilectically on this testimony. First, we would like to point out the change, apparently rapid, that the student presented, in behavioral terms, from the first week to the second. Mirela, from a more participative stance, starts to present herself as introspective, in the teacher’s perception. What could have happened? Considering that there was some care from the teacher to *acclimatize* the newly arrived student to the class and, although, apparently, such acclimatization was successful, we speculate on what may have happened to change this configuration. Could we say that the

student's cultural origins might have caused a feeling of detachment to the point of causing the Brazilian children to behave one way in front of the teacher and another when away from her? Or is it that the pedagogical practices of our schools, unaccustomed to discussing differences in the classroom, did not address them *properly*? And if so, what would be the *proper* way? Or, on the other hand, could we claim that Brazilian policies on refugees are bold and even internationally recognized, but not known when it comes to everyday life? Or is it all these aspects and more?

The Omnilectical perspective, as we have seen above, is not concerned with the answer, let alone the right answer. We think that all alternatives are possible, and that is why we always try to take a step forward in our interpretations, which is why we incorporate the dialectical and complex aspects. Considering the hypotheses raised above about the case regarding the behavioral change from one week to the next, and bringing the dialectic component of the Omnilectics into play, we can argue that, possibly, in the culture of that Rio de Janeiro school, the idea of an approximation such as made by the teacher in the relevant class between refugee and other students is an important initiative, considering, especially, the locally accepted idea that this school is representative of a school that promotes inclusion.

Politically, we could suggest that the local and institutional administrations were in agreement with these premises. On the other hand, how can we explain the enormous contradiction about the fact that, in the municipality where the school is located, no public education policy refers to refugees? Taking this into consideration, it may become clearer why the practice of approximation was restricted, in that year, to the initiative of the teacher, and why the pedagogical practices that followed it did not contemplate this concern with the same level of interest.

The complexity is introduced when, upon considering a new (third, fourth, fifth... N) side (or outlook), the same contradictions that would point to a limitation in terms of the school's initiative in some people's points of view, could also mean, for others – such as us – the first step of a process that had been, so far, unthinkable, and open doors for the improvement of these steps; and even transforming them into new possibilities for thinking, deciding and doing (cultures, policies and practices) at school.

We see, at this juncture, that the teacher's attitude gives rise to new ways of thinking / mediating / acting when faced with a child from another culture. These new forms, analyzed in an omnilectical way, can generate other multiple inclusion practices, new institutional policies and new cultures in the school community. These relationships have a totalizing and complex character, since, on the one hand, we can observe, through a small section of the whole, how some of the school dynamics have been, on the other hand, we can say that this analysis expands our view on possibilities of more sensitive pedagogical actions

both in relation to the child in question and to the processes of inclusion in education in a broader way.

### **Conclusions: in the attempt to include the child, the path to inclusion is built**

Upon starting this paper, we mentioned that we went through a moment of surprise when narrating what we came across while performing data analysis from one of the studies that underlie this paper: ongoing research. Based on the element of surprise, namely, what we call institutional blindness, we then chose the following questions to focus on in this article: How would the school where the focus student of the ongoing research studied be characterized? What could we learn from what we saw from the inclusion/exclusion processes that the child was going through, and to what extent was this reflected more as an institutional issue than focused on a subject?

Finishing a paper whose perspective of analysis is called Omnilectic is, so to speak, a contradiction for us. The Omnilectical perspective does not allow us to get to the end of things, but perhaps, we would say, to new beginnings. In this sense, answering the questions that inspired us does not mean making a single statement, nor presenting today's conclusions as final. In this way, we will then try to answer the questions on a provisional manner, keeping in mind what we have been able to raise analytically with our critical outlook on cultures, policies and practices in dialectical and complex interplay, in the present historical moment. It is never too much to emphasize that new conclusions (and always temporary) are possible according to the eyes that analyze our narrative, as well as according to the cultural, political, practical, dialectical and complex context in which these eyes meet.

The first question upon which we planned to lay our gaze was how the school of our focus student was characterized. The school in question was characterized by an institution locally recognized as inclusive due to being a reference in the scope of special education. Here we identify a question that is open to further discussion: if inclusion is a matter to be tackled by everyone, how can an institution that dedicates itself to a particular group be acknowledged by an entire local community as inclusive? Or maybe there was, in that community, a local culture that considered inclusion as something aimed only at students with disability, which could, in turn, explain, at least partially, the lack of a local policy regarding inclusion (on the assumption that the already existing national ones would suffice). Furthermore, this could also explain certain discriminatory practices, or naturalization of what our eyes saw as blindness. This, in itself, would point to a series of likely contradictions, which, on the other hand, if faced, could open new doors for situations that are quite different from what we are used to seeing.

Regardless of this observation, the fact is that the institution started to receive refugee children in 2015, and in 2016 there was a process in

which we identified attitudes that excluded the focus refugee child, in other words, left her separated from the dynamics, from the exchanges between peers. Returning to the thought process in the previous paragraph, we could argue that, upon expanding its scope of population of “included” students, perhaps the school also expanded its own concept of inclusion – a hypothesis that we consider quite desirable.

Even though it is not possible, due to the Omnilectical gaze, to characterize the school in a finalistic sense, we can say that, in a broader context, this school did have something special (in the positive meaning of the term), after all, it was the one that welcomed the most refugee children in our realm of possibilities. This “specialty” of the school can be translated as an important gap in this historic moment, not only because it stood out receiving more students than other schools in 2018, but also when considering the current context of 2019, in which such subject (refugees) and various others closely linked to Human Rights, seem to have been left in the background in the political agendas of Brazil, or, at least, seem to have fallen a lot in priority, given the silencing of the mainstream media on the subject and given the populational division about Human Rights in current days.

Likewise, in an institutional context, we were able to observe initiatives that, however insufficient they might have seemed in our eyes, are worthy of proper consideration, as the school has only very recently started to receive this population (refugees). This may point to a school that has not shied away from the challenge of facing aspects that are still unknown and incorporating them into its reality. We chose to believe that this was the movement chosen by the school, which gives us hope regarding its development towards an institutional profile that is increasingly guided by the principles of inclusion in education.

It is also worth mentioning that, although this matter is not directly within our subjects of discussion, at the municipal level, the lack of knowledge of the NUPE Coordinator can be understood as our first encounter with what we call institutional blindness, as she did not master the minutiae of the child’s entry and referral process, thus harming the child’s inclusion process. At the same time, the lack of knowledge on the topic in Brazil can be pointed out as a factor for this blindness.

These questions led us to wonder the following: why does the refugee child’s school not see situations of exclusion and difficulties faced by the child? With this paper, we can point out that the in-depth ignorance of the demands of this target audience can be an answer to this question. It is also possible that the Brazilian legislative/institutional ignorance about refugee children, given that it is a new theme under study in the country, despite being a country made up of immigrants, some of whom are refugees, could be a way of understanding this blindness in what relates to the problems of the insertion of the refugee child.

The second question that we set out to reflect on was about asking what we could learn from what we saw from the inclusion/exclusion processes that the child was going through.

In this conjuncture, upon recalling the initial contact of the refugee child in the Brazilian school, we started to think that the developed institutional, pedagogical and strategic procedural movement (cultures, policies and practices) reaches the new public, in the welcoming phase, and is imbued with elements that demonstrate care and attention, such as: the school placement test. On the other hand, in the gut of the matter, if we may use the expression, this process makes us question in what proportions and/or possibilities the realization and the subsequent referral of the refugee child is being planned, considering the specificities for the development of its potential: language and (Lingala/French) and African culture. Thus, in our view, the initiatives of the various instances involved in the inclusion movement are clear, making an effort to practice inclusion, but in an embryonic manner, since the characteristics are not being seen carefully.

Despite this, the inclusion process takes place in the reflection of the practice. Looking at the trajectory of a refugee child already reveals to us the movement itself that is being elaborated and constituted by the many educational agents that seek to materialize inclusive practices. In other words, in an attempt to include the child, the path to inclusion is constructed. By observing, more deeply, the step-by-step of the girl, Mirela, through the eyes of her teacher, we understood the obstacles and challenges possibly experienced by children in situations of refuge who are dialectically part of an inseparable process of inclusion/exclusion that is constantly happening through human relationships.

Omnilectically, inclusion will take place in the constant reflection of daily practice and in the construction of new institutional policies and generating new cultures, considering that the relationships are dialectical and complex.

Finally, the third question pondered the extent to which the verified blindness was reflected more as an institutional issue than as something that came from the refugee child itself. The lack of knowledge about the subject by the institution, at the municipal level seen in NUPE's Coordinator and at the school level seen in the teacher of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of elementary school, point, provisionally, to an institutional blindness of the child's linguistic and cultural demands of the refugee child and the exclusionary relationships that occurred in the classroom.

Mirela, the refugee child mentioned, experienced, according to the teacher, moments of loneliness and apartheid, as classmates did not allow her participation in the games during recess. This situation seemed instigating to us, as, despite being aware of the child's vulnerability, the teacher did not understand her isolation as a discrediting and exclusion-promoting facet of part of the class. Her practice was limited to asking the child, daily, about what was happening, meaning there was an unintentional blindness, as the professional did not consider the subjective aspects of the child's inclusion process in the class. At first glance, the child seemed to be included, but the process was being challenged by minutiae that were not investigated by the school as a whole,

as the child's isolation happened at recess, and thus was a visible element for other school agents who circulated in the space, meaning no one saw this as a problem.

Finally, we return to the fact that the inclusion/exclusion process takes place daily and is permeated by the contradictory elements that constitute it. The movement for inclusion is endless, but despite that, we should not disregard the proposed inclusion attempts. In the case studied, the attempt to include the refugee child after the realization that she was being excluded was the path taken by the school. Looking for pedagogical alternatives for school issues, which are not always clear to educational agents in their work processes, we saw that the inclusion process is non-linear and can happen from a situation of exclusion<sup>5</sup>.

Received in 29<sup>th</sup> of July of 2019

Approved in 21<sup>st</sup> of September of 2020

## Notes

- 1 This World Education Forum was promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Bank, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- 2 Source: <<https://nacoesunidas.org/declaracao-de-incheon-disponivel-em-portugues-no-site-da-unesco/>>. Acesso em: 01 de junho de 2019.
- 3 Coyotes are responsible for illegally getting immigrants across the borders. (Sousa; Dias, 2010).
- 4 Neighborhood of the municipality of Duque de Caxias, in the state of Rio de Janeiro.
- 5 Thanks to CAPES, CNPq e FAPERJ.

## References

- ACNUR. Alto Comissariado das Nações Unidas para Refugiados. **Um Recomeço para os Refugiados Sírios no Brasil**. 2016. Disponível em: <<http://www.acnur.org/portugues/noticias/noticia/umrecomecoparaosrefugiadossiriosnobrasil/>>. Acesso em: 15/07/2019.
- ALMEIDA, Maicon Salvino Nunes de. **Educação para refugiados congolese em Duque de Caxias/RJ: a (in)devida inclusão de crianças e adolescentes**. 2017. 53 f. Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (Licenciatura em Pedagogia) – Faculdade de Educação, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2017.
- BRASIL. Ministério da Educação. **ONU Elogia Brasil por Receber Crianças Refugiadas em Escolas**. (2015) Disponível em: <<http://www.brasil.gov.br/editoria/educacao-e-ciencia/2015/09/onu-elogia-brasil-por-receber-criancas-refugiadas-em-escolas>>. Acesso em: 16/06/2018.
- BOOTH, Tony; AINSCOW, Mel. **Index Para a Inclusão - desenvolvendo a aprendizagem e a participação na escola**. Traduzido por Mônica Pereira dos Santos. Produzido pelo LaPEADE, 2002.

GIL, Antonio Carlos. **Métodos e Técnicas de Pesquisa Social**. São Paulo: Atlas, 2008.

LUKÁCS, Georg. **Introdução a uma Estética Marxista**. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978.

MANZINI, Eduardo José. Entrevista Semi-Estruturada: análise de objetivos e de roteiros. In: SEMINÁRIO INTERNACIONAL SOBRE PESQUISA E ESTUDOS QUALITATIVOS, 2., 2004, Bauru. A pesquisa qualitativa em debate. **Anais...** Bauru: USC, 2004. CD-ROOM. ISBN:85-98623-01-6.

MORIN, Edgar; ALMEIDA, Maria da Conceição; CARVALHO, Edgard de Assis. **Educação e Complexidade: os sete saberes e outros ensaios**. 4. ed. São Paulo: Cortez, 2007.

SANTOS, Mônica Pereira dos. **Dialogando sobre inclusão em educação: contando casos (e descasos)**. Curitiba: Editora CRV, 2013.

SOUSA, Leonardo Gomes de; DIAS, Carlos Alberto. Microrregião de Governador Valadares: a busca de uma identidade territorial para uma região em crise. In: SEMINÁRIO DE ECONOMIA MINEIRA, 13., 2010, Diamantina. **Anais...** Belo Horizonte: Cedeplar-UFMG, 2010.

YIN, Robert. **Estudo de Caso: planejamento e métodos**. 4. ed. Porto Alegre: Bookman, 2010.

**Maicon Salvino Nunes de Almeida** is a PhD student and master in Education in the Graduate Program in Education at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Graduated in Pedagogy at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1699-9483>

E-mail: [maiconsalvino@gmail.com](mailto:maiconsalvino@gmail.com)

**Mônica Pereira dos Santos** is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Graduated in Psychology, holds a master's and PhD in Psychology and Special Education from the University of London.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7057-7804>

E-mail: [monicapes@gmail.com](mailto:monicapes@gmail.com)

**Carine Mendes da Silva** is a Pedagogue, PhD by the Graduate Program in Psychology (Human Development Processes and Health) at the University of Brasília and a master in the same field.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6619-1634>

E-mail: [carine\\_gnt@hotmail.com](mailto:carine_gnt@hotmail.com)

Editor-in-charge: Fabiana Amorim Marcello

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International. Available at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.